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ABSTRACT

These newsletters, produced during the first year of activity of a special committee of the National Council of Teachers of English, focus on the back-to-the-basics movement as it affects the teaching of English. The first newsletter describes the establishment of SLATE as an action wing of the council. The other seven deal in turn with specific issues: literacy, grammar and usage, composition, censorship of instructional materials, language and dialect, spelling, and reading. Each begins with a statement of the issues, continues with a summary of professional viewpoints, suggests strategies for action, and includes a brief list of further resources. (AA)

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Vol. 1, No. 1 March 1976

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SLATE

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Support for Learning and Teaching of English

NEW ACTION WING FOR COUNCIL BEING PLANNED

A proposal from the Executive Committee that a new action wing of NCTE be established has been approved by the Council's Board of Directors. The proposed wing, creation of which was spearheaded by Stephen Dunning during his year as NCTE president, has been given the acronym **SLATE**—for Support for the Learning and Teaching of English. Once established, **SLATE** will have as its central purpose the creation of environments for free and responsible teaching and learning of English. To that end, SLATE will engage in such actions as the following:

1. monitoring and reporting on local, state, and national policy-making groups;
2. educating members and others to the political implications of legislative, legal, and agency actions, both private and public;
3. preparing press releases and position papers on issues where the expertise of the Council or the welfare of English teaching needs to be represented;
4. making available expert testimony;
5. linking itself with other groups to take appropriate action on issues of shared concern;
6. seeking other ways to interpret and develop Council policy, and letting such policy be known where it might enhance the environment for free and responsible teaching and learning of English.

Following the Annual Business Meeting, NCTE members attending the convention in San Diego elected a SLATE Steering Committee to refine planning for the action wing, which could emerge after the 1976 NCTE convention as a separate entity within the Council.

Although the Executive Committee had the authority to appoint the steering committee for SLATE, it sought support from the Board of Directors because the plan for SLATE involves a marked change in Council practice, if not policy: the principal support for SLATE's work will come from voluntary contributions. On this point, the Executive Committee commented as follows in a memorandum to the Board of Directors:

> Believing an even more active commitment to—and engagement in—social action and political education is both the will of the membership and the destiny of the Council, the Executive Committee seeks advice and support. It is vested in the Executive Committee to appoint committees, commissions, and task forces, and to support those groups financially. But the Executive Committee's vision of SLATE is such that separate funding seems reasonable, perhaps necessary. The present budget is inadequate to support both present services and the new activities envisioned here.
>
> Believing them essential to continuing improvements in English teaching and learning, the Executive Committee reaffirms its support of such activities as regular publication of a variety of journals, pamphlets, and monographs, support for affiliates, for regional and national meetings, and for committees, commissions, and task forces. The Executive Committee believes that the Council should seek new resources and make new commitments fitting the changing social and political scenes. When new resources are generated, the Executive Committee believes SLATE will provide the Council with a voice that will be heard, that *must* be heeded in legislatures, in courts of law, in school boards, in state offices of education, and in policy-making groups at the national level.

CENTRAL PURPOSE OF COUNCIL REMAINS UNCHANGED

Members attending the NCTE Convention in San Diego were assured that the formation of SLATE will not change the central purpose of the Council, which is, and has been, to improve the teaching of English at all school levels. What has changed dramatically is the political and social environments for English teaching. In reference to these changing environments, the Executive Committee commented as follows in a memorandum to the Board of Directors:

> One important shift which seems steady, growing, and irreversible is in how and where policy decisions are made. The shift is more and more from the practitioners and consumers, from teachers and students, to managers, bureaucrats, and legislators; the shift is from local school boards to state and national education agencies and to the state and federal courts. Fifty years ago the Council could further many of its members' objectives to work with local and state groups; today, to be equally effective, the Council must confront more vigorously in national forums such issues as censorship, the measurement of English teaching and learning, and even the definition of the discipline.
>
> If the Council is to prevail in this changing environment, it must develop new energies and new resources. The voice of the Council needs to be stronger on issues of deep consequence. The alternative is to settle for reactive efforts aimed at patching up damage already done, rather than preventive or anticipatory efforts.

CS 203 053

MEMBERS ELECT SLATE STEERING COMMITTEE

Following the Annual Business Meeting at the NCTE convention in San Diego, Council members elected five of ten nominees for the SLATE Steering Committee. Those elected were Richard Adler, University of Montana; Elisabeth McPherson, Forest Park Community College, St. Louis, Mo.; Jesse Perry, San Diego City Schools; Virginia P. Redd, University of Maryland, Baltimore County; and Charles Suhor, New Orleans Public Schools. Members of the committee met January 23-25 to review the results of soliciting funds for SLATE at the convention, to discuss new ways of developing funding, and, in light of that discussion, to set priorities for SLATE and courses of action for 1976. The Steering Committee chaired by Virginia Redd, will serve until the 1976 convention, after which SLATE, if it emerges as a separate entity within the Council, will have its own governing board.

CHARTER CONTRIBUTORS TO SLATE

Here is the list of charter contributors to SLATE as of February 1, 1976. If we unintentionally missed your name, please let us know. But if your name is absent and there has been no oversight, please join the list of charter contributors by sending a donation today. See the enclosed form for details.

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EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE TO ASSESS COUNCIL'S TAX-EXEMPT STATUS

In recognition that NCTE may have to modify its present tax-exempt status if it—or through it, SLATE—begins to exert greater influence in shaping legislation, NCTE members attending the Annual Business Meeting in San Diego resolved "that the Executive Committee carefully, and with expert legal advice, assess the balance of privilege and constraint under the Council's present tax-exempt status; that the Committee responsibly assess the advantages and the losses involved in changing the Council or one or more of its entities to another tax-exempt status; that the Committee be empowered to modify the tax-exempt status if it is clearly in the best interest of the Council; and that the Committee report back to the members at the 1976 annual meeting the results of its assessment and action."

Since 1940, NCTE has been tax-exempt under provisions which apply to charitable, religious, educational, and scientific organizations and foundations. As a consequence, apart from general tax exemption, the Council has enjoyed a number of privileges, among them reduced postal rates and the assurance for donors that their contributions and bequests were tax-deductible. At the same time, the Council has been barred from any "substantial" involvement ["substantial" has never been officially defined] in activities permitted to other kinds of tax-exempt organizations. Two such activities are "grass roots lobbying" (alerting members to the consequences of proposed legislation at state and federal levels and suggesting appropriate courses of action) and direct efforts by NCTE on its own initiative to influence legislation. Because of the steady shift in the arenas of decision-making that affect the teaching of English, NCTE members in recent years have urged that the Council become more active in shaping legislation and, if necessary, modify its present tax-exempt status.

SLATE NOMINATING COMMITTEE ELECTED

Under the election procedures adopted at the SLATE organizational meeting in San Diego, Miles Myers, Castlemont High School, Oakland, Calif.; Frederick Koury, City-As-School, Brooklyn, N.Y.; and Sandra Clark, Sammamish High School, Bellevue, Washington, were elected to serve as the first SLATE Nominating Committee. Persons wishing to suggest candidates for leadership in SLATE should write to members of the Nominating Committee or to SLATE, c/o NCTE, 1111 Kenyon Road, Urbana, Ill. 61801.

NCTE SUPPORTS NATIONAL AD HOC COMMITTEE AGAINST CENSORSHIP

Since its inception following recent attempts by the United States Supreme Court to clarify standards for censoring obscenity, the National Ad Hoc Committee Against Censorship, an alliance of national organizations, has been supported by NCTE. The Council is represented at meetings of the committee by Robert Spencer Johnson, Long Island Council of Teachers of English.

In 1973 and 1974 the Supreme Court issued a number of decisions which many people—including four of the nine justices—feared would lead to serious attacks on freedom of expression. In the past 30 months, over 250 bills have been introduced in more than 40 state legislatures in an attempt to comply with the Court's standards. At best, most of the bills are unclear and contradictory. To clarify legislation and to protect rights guaranteed by the First Amendment, the Ad Hoc Committee provides information to state and local legislatures, including on occasion the testimony of expert witnesses. In addition, it helps its participating organizations educate their own members to the dangers of censorship and to ways of opposing it.

As part of its program, the Ad Hoc Committee has issued a "Statement of Concern," which the NCTE Executive Committee has endorsed. The statement follows:

> The steady erosion of First Amendment rights, stemming from the Supreme Court's 1973-74 obscenity holdings, menaces ever more critically the freedom of communication that is the indispensable condition of a healthy democracy. In a pluralistic society it would be impossible for all people at all times to agree on the value of all ideas; and fatal to moral, artistic and intellectual growth if they did.

Some of the undersigned organizations reject all barriers abridging access to any material, however controversial or even abhorrent to some. Others reject barriers for adults, so long as their individual right of choice is not infringed. All of us are united in the conviction that censorship of what we see and hear and read constitutes an unacceptable dictatorship over our minds and a dangerous opening to religious, political, artistic and intellectual repression.

At a meeting on December 9, 1975, in New York City, the Committee presented a program focused on three threats to the First Amendment: the censorship of obscenity; the censorship of textbooks; and governmental censorship of information. Franklyn S. Hayman, professor, Communications Studies, Northwestern University, provided a historical review of court decisions related to censorship of obscenity. In a mock case of textbook censorship, those attending the conference role-played the parts of parents, students, teachers, and school board members at an open meeting of the board. Diverse attitudes toward secrecy in government were offered by Morton H. Halperin, former senior staff member of the National Security and Civil Liberties Project, and Frank N. Trager, professor of international affairs and director, National Security Program, New York University.

In addition to NCTE, organizations endorsing the Ad Hoc Committee's Statement of Concern include the American Civil Liberties Union, American Jewish Committee, American Library Association, American Orthopsychiatric Association, Associated Council of the Arts, Authors League of America, Child Study Association, Directors Guild of America, National Council of Churches of Christ, National Council of Jewish Women, National Education Association, Speech Communication Association, The Newspaper Guild, Union of American Hebrew Congregations, U.S. National Student Association, and Writers Guild of America, East, Inc.

For more information, write National Ad Hoc Committee Against Censorship, 22 East 40th Street, New York, New York 10016, or phone (212) 686-7098.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE VOICES CONCERNS TO COLLEGE ENTRANCE EXAMINATION BOARD

In recent letter to the College Entrance Examination Board (CEEB), Robert F. Hogan, NCTE executive secretary, expressed the concern of the Executive Committee "over using tests of English either to determine whether students are to be admitted to college or to place them in particular classes once they are admitted." Mr. Hogan also reported the strong objection expressed by members of the committee to CEEB sponsorship "of tests of composition that do not require students to write." Mr. Hogan advised CEEB that if it does continue to administer the English Composition Test (ECT) in the Admissions Testing Program, "then the NCTE Executive Committee believes that the Board must supplement the present objective test with an adequate examination of writing–certainly more than a twenty-minute sample." Finally, Mr. Hogan cautioned the board that even if it does add an examination of writing to the present ECT, "the addition of that examination should in no way be interpreted as NCTE endorsement of either objective or subjective tests of writing sponsored by the Board."

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE ENDORSES STATEMENTS ON STANDARDIZED ACHIEVEMENT TESTS

At its meeting on November 23 in San Diego, the Executive Committee endorsed a series of statements on standardized achievement tests. The statements were drafted at a conference convened earlier in November by the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) and the North Dakota Study Group on Evaluation. NCTE was among the twenty-five groups represented at the conference.

Among the statements endorsed by the Executive Committee were these:

1. The profession needs to place a high priority on developing and putting into wide use new processes of assessment that are more fair and effective than those currently in use and that more adequately consider the diverse talents, abilities, and cultural backgrounds of children.
2. Parents and educators need to be much more actively involved in the planning and processes of assessment.
3. Any assessment results reported to the public must include explanatory material that details the limitations inherent in the assessment instruments used.
4. Educational achievement must be reported in terms broader than single-score national norms, which can be misleading.
5. Information about assessment processes should be shared among the relevant professions, policy makers, and the public so that appropriate improvements and reform can be discussed by all parties.
6. Every standardized test administered to a child should be returned to the school for analysis by the teachers, parents, and child.
7. Further, the standardized tests used in any given community should be made publicly available to that community to give citizens an opportunity to understand and review the tests in use.

Groups attending the conference will convene again in six months to discuss what further concerted actions are necessary in response to widespread use and misuse of standardized achievement tests in the nation's schools.

COUNCIL REPRESENTED AT AAP MEETING

As a consequence of a meeting attended by Stephen Dunning, immediate past president of NCTE, the American Association of Publishers (AAP) Freedom to Read Committee has been alerted to the Council's interest in collaborating with the AAP committee in resolving issues related to intellectual and educational freedom. At the meeting, held in New York City last summer, Mr. Dunning spoke briefly on the common aims and "shared agenda" of NCTE and AAP in protecting freedoms established by the First Amendement. He urged publishers to speak out publicly on issues of academic freedom and to keep NCTE informed of their activities on freedom's behalf.

SLATE Newsletter will be published periodically by the National Council of Teachers of English and is directed to NCTE members who contribute $10 or more to support SLATE. Contributions should be sent to SLATE, NCTE Headquarters, 1111 Kenyon Rd., Urbana IL 61801.

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LLATE

Support for Learning and Teaching of English

WHAT ARE THE "BASICS" IN ENGLISH?

The Issues

The current "back to the basics" slogan is symbolic of a nationwide concern and belief that the schools have failed in their major mission, which is to develop literate human beings. To laypersons and educators alike, literacy means the ability to read and write. Parents, legislators, and citizens' groups demand that the schools get back to the basics, especially in the teaching of English. They want teachers to return to practices that prove that reading, spelling, punctuation, grammar and usage still are respectable parts of the English curriculum. English/Language Arts teachers accept responsibility for teaching reading and writing. There is no immediate hostility toward the parent who asks: *Why can't my Johnny read better?* or *Why can't my eighth grader write a decent sentence?* or *Why aren't* they (you) *teaching the basics any more?* Part of the misunderstanding between English teachers and their critics stems from a need to define the "basics." Parents and legislators want students who score well on tests and schools that score above the norms on state and national assessments. For them, the surest evidence for teaching basic literacy skills comes when teachers isolate aspects of skills (punctuation, capitalization, and spelling) and drill them.

We English teachers recognize that aspects of skills are important parts of language learning, but we suspect that true literacy is not just the command of isolated skills. We know that language is a communication process, and that the whole of communication is much greater than the sum of its parts. We know that "good" scores on quantitative tests can be achieved in one of two ways: by teaching for the tests without worrying about the whole communication process, or by focusing on wholes by teaching the skills necessary for use. We know that test scores may not necessarily measure literacy, but we find that parents, school administrators, and other citizens lose patience when we try to develop literacy by putting skills into a functional perspective with less emphasis on isolated drill. Everyone agrees that basic skills should be taught. The conflict between teacher and parent concerns not only *how* the teaching of basic skills should be accomplished, but also *what* those basic skills are or should be. The crucial issue which must be made clear if true literacy is to be developed is: What are the "basics" in English?

Professional Viewpoints: NCTE/Research

In 1952, The NCTE Commission on English published *The English Language Arts* (New York: Appleton-Century Crofts, 1952). In it, they identified the basic interrelated skills of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Other succeeding NCTE publications identified the total language processes involved with and revolving around the skills required for English proficiency. The movement has been decidedly away from the teaching of skills in isolation and the traditional emphasis upon grammar exercises, sentence parsing, and other drillwork. Instead, NCTE advocates the importance of language arts skills being used to reinforce each other. In this process of reinforcement, students explore a wide range of reading interests, get involved in a variety of related learning activities, and thereby develop a firmer grasp of all of the necessary language competencies.

Available research in the teaching of language, composition, and literature suggests that *isolated* teaching of skills cannot be justified. The findings suggest that, like synergy, the whole (language acquisition and development) is greater than the sum of its parts (unrelated drill teaching of grammar and spelling mechanics). Several studies underscore the interrelated nature of language. Frogner (1933), McCarthy (1954), and Diederich (1957) suggest that maturity and stage of intellectual development [not grammar and sentence parsing] are closely related to composition skill.[1] Composition and reading are assumed to be closely related, this assumption based upon the obvious interrelationships between the writer's message, the chosen medium, and the reader's skill in interpreting the message. Good measures of reading ability have turned out to be the most trustworthy indices of writing ability.

Searles and Carlson suggest the uselessness of teaching grammar and usage in isolation from composition.[2] Cook critized the isolated teaching of grammar, syntax, and punctuation and stressed the fact that if language is to be viewed as an instrument of communication, grammar should be taught not as a set of rules but as a factor in comprehending meaning.[3] Similar viewpoints have been expressed by McKee and Ebbit.[4] NCTE strongly criticized the methods which involved devoting separate time periods to separate skills without relating those skills. A 1958 study by Meckel, Squire, and Leonard stressed the importance of reading as a source of ideas, and writing as a means of clarifying, organizing, and applying ideas from reading and discussion.

The result of these highly influential studies in English as been a definition of "basics" that treats the discipline as an interrelated whole, and not only avoids, but also disavows the kind of "basic" content now being defined by tests and called for loudly in the "Back to Basics" issue.

What we have learned from examining the viewpoints and research of authorities in the profession is that language development is a *process* deserving of a broad approach. Emphasis in teaching should be placed upon the the ability to

use skill elements (grammar, usage, vocabulary, spelling, etc.) in relevant language processes, and to keep those elements in perspective as supportive to the larger processes.

In summary, research and practical experience have revealed a number of "knowns" about English teaching: We know

- that there is little transfer value in isolated oral drill on usage for promoting changes in speech.
- that varieties of oral language exist, and that different forms are acceptable and useful in different contexts.
- that it has not worked to teach formal grammar in isolation as a means of improving writing.
- that the content of many language tests provides reasons for deep reservations: Can a child's writing skill be measured on a test that requires no writing?
- that drill on phonics has not proved a sure path to reading.
- that most students learn to write and read by performing real tasks: writing stories, notices, letters, and reports for classroom "audience"; reading factual articles, advertisements, stories, and other real messages.
- that spelling and vocabulary are best learned in context; that sentence building is more productive than either sentence analysis or labeling.
- that drills on parts may be useful for students when diagnosis shows weaknesses in specific areas, but that drill on parts is not a good substitute for whole reading and writing tasks.
- that for some capable students, school loses credibility when work is mainly busywork drill; many "average" students need help *during* the process of reading and writing far more than they need isolated drill on parts; and some less able students are turned off from reading and writing (and sometimes from school) when exercises on parts of reading and writing don't lead to skill as readers and writers.

Strategies for Action

What society wants is clear: literacy. Reading and writing, its basic components, traditionally and appropriately are the concern of the English/language arts teacher. It is how to achieve literacy (and what *kind* of literacy is needed) that separates teachers from parents. The first step is to dilute the hostility that grows between "us and them" by acknowledging the literacy message. We must hear it and know that it is real; but we must not offer quick answers on how to accomplish it. We are obligated not to mislead parents into thinking that drills on parts or the learning of grammar or phonics (though quick and easy to do) will lead to better reading or writing. We cannot fall back on the dishonest practice of "teaching to the test."

Since we recognize the limitations of teaching isolated skills, our second need is to define what really is "basic" in English teaching. Authorities suggest that the real basics are language processes. A way to focus in on language processes is to use what we have learned about language acquisition and development to derive a set that can be applied to all human language activities. Three basic levels of language processes can be identified in ascending order: 1) imitative processes related to basic literacy at the recognition and recall levels, 2) organizing processes related to fluency in the use of basic language tools, and 3) critical, creative, and evaluative processes involving originality and conscious choice of language alternatives. These processes require the use of parts, but in a context rather than in isolation. A grid like the following could help to explain the relationships to parents:

Levels of Processes	LANGUAGE SKILLS		
	Reading	**Oral Language**	**Writing**
Imitative	Recognition and recall of ideas	Basic auditory perception, discriminatory reproduction (in any dialect)	Basic literacy in manipulating symbols
Organizing	Organizing and interpreting ideas	Ease and fluency of oral communication	Organizing and producing messages in sentences, paragraphs, etc.
Critical/ Creative Evaluation	Reading critically and selectively	Conscious choice of language alternatives	Conscious choice of patterns to suit purpose (originality, style)

Parents and others can be helped to understand that the "basics" being called for really represent only the lowest levels of skills—the isolated parts. By focusing on wholes at the organizing and critical levels, we help students better to understand why the imitative skills are necessary and how these skills fit into the whole picture.

A third step is to seek serious talk with parents about societal problems affecting literacy. Do parents sense, as we do, the decline in reading in the home? Have they noticed, with us, the conspicuous decline in writing? Are parents concerned, as we are, with the scarcity of role models for young readers and writers? (The facts are: Fewer than 2% of adult Americans buy over 90% of all hardcover books; television is a frequent substitute for reading, and the telephone is a frequent substitute for writing.) Are parents communicating to their children negative values regarding the skills they are asking the schools to teach?

As part of the societal discussions, we need to work toward developing enlightened attitudes about what constitutes "correct" speech. Awareness of the concept of appropriateness is best developed by an examination of one's own range of language usage, from highly formal to informal. Your colleagues in the profession can join forces with you in efforts to gain recognition of the existence of varied dialect forms for *all* speakers. Efforts can be made to challenge the assumption (by employers, for example) that the existence of a "different" speech dialect automatically implies defects in the ability to read, to write effectively, or to think logically.

A fourth and most crucial step is to engage in *economic* discussions with parents and the community. Concede, for example, that not enough attention is given to the teaching of writing; and note that not enough well-trained teachers and other professionals are available to give students individual help and encouragement. Inservice training to develop teachers' skills requires the allocation of sufficient resources. Adequate allocations of funds are necessary to provide classroom environments conducive to learning basic skills: classroom libraries full of books, magazines, and other materials appealing to a variety of tastes; and comfortable places to look, skim, and read. Some special programs may be necessary where students, for whatever reasons, have been found to be operating at a deficit for long periods of time. Perhaps the time and money invested by state legislatures, school systems, and boards of education in mandating testing programs (a hazardous and unknown quantity) could be better invested in providing adequate resources for supporting the many known quantities upon which educational programs could and should be operating.

Finally, our dialogues with parents, school boards, legislators, and other citizens should include honest self-criticism of areas where we have not done as well as we should, enlightened discussion of the problems they can and must help solve, and mutual recognition of the need for societal support (in attitudes as well as resources) so that English/language arts teachers can, appropriately enough, deal with the basics of reading and writing.

Stephen Dunning
Virginia Redd
(For the SLATE STEERING COMMITTEE)

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The SLATE STEERING COMMITTEE offers the Starter Sheets as resources for dealing with current issues affecting the teaching of English. Reproduce these sheets and use them in any ways that might help to promote better understanding of the goals of English teaching.

Members of the Steering Committee for SLATE (Support for Learning and Teaching of English) have published a series of Starter Sheets on the relationship between curricular components of English and the "back to the basics" movement in American education. Each of the pamphlets is intended to help initiate ("start") discussion about an area of concern to teachers of English, and each follows a similar format: first, pertinent issues are summarized; next, relevant research is cited; finally, strategies for action are suggested. Steering committee members are: Virginia Redd, Charles Suhor, Richard Adler, Jesse Perry, and Elisabeth McPherson.

To date, six of the pamphlets have been prepared: BACK TO THE BASICS: LITERACY; BACK TO THE BASICS: GRAMMAR AND USAGE; BACK TO THE BASICS: COMPOSITION; CENSORSHIP OF INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS; BACK TO THE BASICS: LANGUAGE AND DIALECT; BACK TO THE BASICS: SPELLING; and BACK TO THE BASICS: READING.

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Vol. 1, No. 3 August 1976

SLATE

Support for Learning and Teaching of English

BACK TO THE BASICS: GRAMMAR AND USAGE

The Issues

The widespread public concern for a return to the "basics" in English has included a call for increased study of grammar and usage. Critics point to the frequent use of bad grammar by contemporary students, and even by community leaders and public officials. The presumed decline in language standards is often attributed to poor language models provided by television, radio, popular music, and other sources that reinforce examples of poor speaking habits. Advocates of "back to the basics" believe that English teachers have abandoned instruction in fundamentals of grammar like parts of speech, sentence diagraming, and subject-verb agreement. Critics also complain that teachers permit students to use poor grammar in the classroom. Students are allowed to "do their own thing," they say, and the result is the sloppy and ineffective speech rampant in today's society.

Professional Viewpoints: NCTE/Research

It is true that many English teachers no longer see grammar instruction as a series of rules distinguishing "right" forms of speech from "wrong" forms. A distinction should be made between *grammar* and *usage*. The former refers to a study of the principles underlying language, the latter to the kind of language called for in particular social situations. Since all normal children adequately learn the basic *grammar* of their native dialects (for example, the native speaker never makes a mistake like saying "am going I not" for "I am not going"), the public clamor actually focuses on dialect-related *usage* differences, (as in the use of "I ain't goin'" for "I am not going"), which are not grammar problems at all.

Usage differences were once popularly believed to reflect differences in intellectual ability. However, linguistic research has demonstrated that all dialects of English are complete, valid language systems. Moreover, people can do abstract thinking and can talk intelligently in any dialect. There are no "smart dialects" or "ignorant dialects."

The NCTE Commission on Composition has recognized the importance of "the study of the structure . . . of language, including English grammar," as a "valuable asset to a liberal education." But, warns the commission, grammar should be taught "for its own sake, not as a substitute for composition," and it should not be an instrument for presenting the grammar of a particular dialect "as 'right' or 'pure' or 'logical' or better than others."

Society's demand for use of standard English in certain formal situations (especially in certain jobs) can be viewed in several ways. From a strictly objective viewpoint, such demands are arbitrary, because dialect differences in America are seldom so great as to hinder communication among speakers of different dialects. The insistence on standard English speech as a job qualification is therefore seen by many as a way of reinforcing class differences, of making sure that the dominant culture is not invaded by talented people of minority cultures. NCTE's Conference on College Composition and Communication forthrightly affirmed "the students' right to their own patterns and varieties of language—the dialect of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style."

From a practical standpoint, the English teacher knows that nonstandard dialects are one kind of barrier to social mobility, so the teaching of English as a second dialect—without denigrating the students' native dialect—is a way of providing students with skills for coping with and surviving in our society. At the same time, it is reasonable to ask the business community and society at large to tolerate a wider range of dialects and language styles, as long as the basic end of communication is being served.

Many English teachers, then, feel a responsibility to reject approaches to grammar and usage study that support the linguistic imperialism of prescriptive "school grammars." They also feel responsible for selecting approaches to language study that (a) actually increase the effectiveness of the students' language performance and (b) describe language structure in an accurate way. The traditional grammar study recommended by "back to basics" advocates meets neither of these qualifications. Research indicates that students' language performance is affected not by formal grammar study but by direct, nonanalytical techniques like the audiolingual method and sentence-combining. And the most accurate descriptions of grammatical structure—if, indeed, abstract knowledge of grammar is to be emphasized—are found in generative grammar and generative semantics.

Increasingly, English teachers are moving away from teaching labels and definitions and towards the things that make a difference in their students' lives: promoting fluency and richness of expression; reducing instances of clichés and jargon; creating an awareness of manipulative language in advertising and politics; and promoting logical exchange of ideas in open discussion.

The impact of the new approaches to language instruction has not yet been felt. At this point, teachers are looking *forward* to the basics, and many years are likely to pass before the ill effects of entrenched, unproductive approaches are modified by the "new fundamentals" of language instruction. In the meantime, the general public must be given a clear picture of the real nature of language problems in our society and the classroom practices best suited to solving those problems.

Strategies for Action

- Reproduce this Starter Sheet freely, in whole or in part.... Distribute it to faculty members, principals, textbook committees, parents' groups, curriculum directors, Boards of Education, businesspeople, and other interested parties.
- Keep an eye out for commentaries on language or language teaching in local newspapers. (Syndicated columnists and letters to the editor often include such commentaries.)
- Respond with your own letter, explaining the problem from the English teachers' perspective.
- Try to influence English program development in your school along the lines suggested by current research and theory, utilizing information in this Starter Sheet and some of the materials cited below.

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Charles Suhor
(For the SLATE STEERING COMMITTEE)

The SLATE STEERING COMMITTEE offers the Starter Sheets as resources for dealing with current issues affecting the teaching of English. Reproduce these sheets and use them in any ways that might help to promote better understanding of the goals of English teaching.

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SLATE

Support for Learning and Teaching of English

BACK TO THE BASICS: COMPOSITION

The Issues

- The National Assessment of Educational Progress report shows that essays of 13- and 17-year olds appear to be deteriorating when compared to the essays of those tested in 1969.
- The Scholastic Aptitude Test scores in 1975 showed the greatest decline in verbal skills in two decades.
- "Anyone who reads student writing today knows that students can't write. . . . the causes are rooted . . . deeply in a society which rears its children on sentimental and shoddy reading material, which bathes them in the linguistic sludge of television, and which debases the English language in the place where all learning begins: at home. . . . The problem, in other words, belongs to us all. So does the solution." (Editor, "The Writing Gap," in *Yale Alumni News*, p. 16.)
- In response to the apparent decline in writing skills, parents and businesspeople and some educators are encouraging the schools to go "back to the basics." What do they mean by this statement? More grammar? More vocabulary drills? More recitation? More writing? More Latin?

Professional Viewpoints: NCTE/Research

[Research quoted in this section can be found in J. Stephen Sherwin's *Four Problems in Teaching English: A Critique of Research* (Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1969.)]

- Does the study of Latin help students master English?
  "There is no *Via Latina* to English mastery. . . . The way to master English is the same as the way to master Latin: attend to it diligently and, if possible, with the help of a good teacher. Any benefit transferable from the study of one to the study of the other is likely to be a meager and insufficient reward for one's efforts. Until the widespread notion that Latin is the handmaiden of English is dispelled, both Latin and English instruction will suffer. . . ." (p. 28)
- Does the study of grammar increase skill in writing?
  Hoyt (1906) found ". . . there is about the same relationship existing between grammar and composition and grammar and interpretation as exists between any two totally different subjects, as grammar and geography." (p. 28)

  Booras (1917) found a correlation of .25 between "attainment in formal English grammar" and "ability to write a composition, write a letter, capitalize and punctuate a paragraph, and correct the language errors in sentences and paragraphs. . . ." (p. 119)

  Ash (1935) determined the "contribution . . . of technical grammar to correctness in writing and to stylistic merit. . . ." Style meant "paragraph building, unity, coherence, emphasis, and avoidance of monotony." His conclusion was that an "emphasis upon style and content improved a student's writing far more than an emphasis on grammar." (p. 123)

  Harris (1962) concluded that ". . . the study of English grammatical terminology has a negligible or even a relatively harmful effect upon the correctness of children's writing." (p. 132)
- Does writing teach writing?
  Buxton (1958) concluded that ". . . regular writing assignments alone will not result in significantly improved essay writing, but that regular writing assignments accompanied by discussion, criticism and revision will improve essay writing." (p. 160)

  Studies by Heys (1962), McColly (1963), Burton and Arnold (1963), and Christiansen (1965) have shown similar results.
- Conclusions:
  Writing alone does not teach writing to any significant extent. However, writing in conjunction with good teaching "will obtain measurably superior results. Motivation, selective criticism, discussion, practical exploration, and revision are the important features of instruction." (p. 168)
- The NCTE Commission on Composition published "Teaching Composition: A Position Statement" in *College English*, October 1974, pp. 219-220. The position statement is prefaced with this quote: "The following are general principles which many members of the NCTE Commission on Composition believe should guide teachers in planning curricula and teaching writing. They are issued as an official position of the Commission." Some excerpts from the Position Statement:

  3. Positive Instruction. Students should be encouraged to use language clearly, vividly, and honestly; they should not be discouraged by (excessive) negative correction and prescription.

  4. Learning by Writing. Learning to write requires writing: writing practice should be a major emphasis of the course. Workbook exercises, drill on usage, and analysis of existing prose are not adequate substitutes for writing.

  11. Dialects. No dialect should be presented as "right" or "pure" or "logical" or better than others. The student should be given an opportunity to learn a standard written English, but the teacher must resist the temptation to allow the cultivation of a standard written English to stifle self-expression or to overshadow em-

phasis on clear, forceful, interesting writing.

12. Grammar. The study of the structure and history of language, including English grammar, is a valuable asset to a liberal education and an important part of the English program. It should, however, be taught for its own sake, not as a substitute for composition, and not with the pretense that it is taught only to improve writing.

15. Audience. Writing implies an audience. Students should be helped to use a voice appropriate to the interests, maturity, and ability of their audience. Furthermore, since young writers are especially concerned about response, their writing should be read by classmates as well as the teacher.

16. Grading. The mere assignment of grades is rarely an adequate way of encouraging and improving writing; whenever possible, grades should be replaced by criticism or detailed evaluation.

17. Class Size. Classes in writing should be limited to no more than twenty to facilitate frequent writing, reading of papers, and discussion of written work.

- About Testing. An excerpt from a letter written by Robert F. Hogan, Executive Secretary of NCTE, to Albert Sims, Vice President of the College Entrance Examination Board, elaborates an NCTE Position:

> "At its recent meeting in San Diego, the Executive Committee of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) discussed at some length issues surrounding present uses of standardized tests in the nation's schools and colleges. During that discussion members of the committee voiced grave concern over using tests of English either to determine whether students are to be admitted to college or to place them in particular classes once they are admitted. Further, members of the committee expressed strong objection to CEEB sponsorship of tests of composition that do not require students to write. If CEEB does continue to administer the English Composition Test (ECT) in the Admissions Testing Program, then the NCTE Executive Committee believes that the Board must supplement the present objective test with an adequate examination of writing—certainly more than a twenty-minute sample. Members of the committee believe that to advertise ECT as a test of composition is to mislead students, teachers, and the public at large." (December 8, 1975)

The National Assessment of Educational Progress invited two nationally recognized experts on writing and language to speculate on the results of their study that showed a decline in writing among 13-year olds and 17-year olds. Dr. Richard Lloyd-Jones, University of Iowa, incoming chair of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, and Dr. Ross Winterowd, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, chair of the NCTE Committee on Composition, visited with the staff of NAEP and included these remarks in the NAEP final report. NAEP—Assessment of Writing: Mechanics. 1969-74 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1975), pp. 43-45.

- There is no evidence here that the schools must "go back to basics"; indeed, the basics seem to be well in hand.
- Writing is inextricably tied to reading: good readers are very often good writers and vice versa. If 1974's average 13- or 17-year old has done less reading than 1969's she or he could be expected to be a somewhat poorer writer.
- What are the "payoffs" for being a good writer in this society? A college education no longer guarantees greater lifetime earnings, there are fewer magazines and newspapers than ever, business and personal communication depend primarily on the telephone, and professions that do call for writing skill do not hold much social status. Perhaps motivation to write is on the wane.
- As classroom size increases, it becomes increasingly difficult for teachers to read essays so they tend to assign fewer and fewer of them. The less writing students do, the poorer they will be at written expression.
- Recent research in writing has demonstrated that there is a gap between textbooks about writing and the practice of professional writers. . . . Regardless of what kinds of writing one examines, one is hard pressed to find organizational strategies resembling those that appear in the traditional writing curriculum.
- 13-year olds do not face the pressures 17-year olds face, so there is no evidence yet of polarization of good and bad writers. The general decline in quality at this age may simply be another reflection of a society-wide change in attitude toward writing.
- The 9-Year old writing task was very different from the task assigned to the older students. It tapped a natural curiosity, prompted a creative response, and was far less "schoolish."

Strategies for Action

When we do not know what is causing a change in performance, it is difficult to recommend strategies for arresting or furthering it. Nonetheless, several courses of action seem clear:

- There should be further analysis of the data to focus on specific problem areas and the achievements of specific groups of people.
- Ideally, remedial writing laboratories should be available to all students as resource centers where trained professionals can respond to particular problems as they arise. Such writing laboratories would be more effective than remedial programs that are curriculum oriented.
- If we want better writing, we need to require more of it; if we require more of it, we need more full or parttime people to respond constructively to what is written.
- The general movement toward a simple, "primer" style of writing is not encouraging and deserves much closer study.
- We have to recognize that teaching grammar is not teaching writing. Grammar is an important subject in its own right; there is no correlation, however, between ability to describe language and ability to use it.

Richard Adler
(For the SLATE STEERING COMMITTEE)

Resources

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SLATE

Support for Learning and Teaching of English

CENSORSHIP OF INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS

The Issues

The American public schools, for many years, have been faced with the problem of censorship. Many such problems have been fostered by groups who question the use of instructional materials that do not meet their moral, religious, political, cultural or ethnic values. Many view the reading of a diversity of instructional materials as a method to indoctrinate students with ideas and values that will turn them against their parents and established institutions or, at best, prompt them to imitate the characters they come across in books and other materials. Demands by various pressure groups to ban or limit the use of language arts instructional materials have often led to violence. These groups constantly remind the profession that they are the persons who "pay the bill" for the operation of schools; therefore, they have the right to make final decisions as to what curricular materials should be selected and used in *their* schools.

Professional Viewpoints: NCTE/Research

The National Council of Teachers of English has long supported the students' right to read. This organization believes two statements can safely be made about censorship: (1) any work is potentially open to attack by someone, somewhere, sometime, for some reason; and (2) censorship is often arbitrary and irrational.

NCTE at its 1967 and 1974 annual meetings issued resolutions condemning censorship of instructional materials, including textbooks. The NCTE Executive Committee endorsed a recent Statement of Concern as issued by the National Ad Hoc Committee Against Censorship.

Statement of Concern

> The steady erosion of First Amendment rights, stemming from the Supreme Court's 1973-74 obscenity holdings, menaces ever more critically the freedom of communication that is the indispensable condition of a healthy democracy. In a pluralistic society, it would be impossible for all people at all times to agree on the value of all ideas; and fatal to moral, artistic and intellectual growth if they did.
>
> Some of the undersigned organizations reject all barriers abridging access to any material, however controversial or even abhorrent to some. Others reject barriers for adults, so long as their individual right of choice is not infringed. All of us are united in the conviction that censorship of what we see and hear and read constitutes an unacceptable dictatorship over our minds and a dangerous opening to religious, political, artistic and intellectual repression.

Author Jerzy Kosinski sees censorship of acknowledged literary works as "a form of psychological malnutrition. Allowed to flourish, it stunts the emotional and intellectual growth of the very students it claims to protect."

In *The Students' Right to Read,* NCTE clarifies the relationship between censorship and the English teacher:

> The right of any individual not just to read but to read whatever one wants to read is basic to a democratic society. This right is based on an assumption that educated and reading persons possess judgment and understanding and can be trusted with the determination of their actions. . . . In selecting books for reading by young people, English teachers consider the contribution which each work may make to the education of the reader, its aesthetic value, its honesty, it readability for a particular group of students, and its appeal to adolescents.

Strategies for Action

You may wish to distribute this sheet along with the NCTE booklet, *The Students' Right to Read,* to all teachers on your staff, to community and parent groups, to school board members, administrator groups and to textbook and curriculum planning committees. In addition, you may want to:

- Contact your local NCTE affiliate for suggested names of local as well as national English language arts leaders who might be able to offer testimony and/or advice in censorship cases.
- Notify the author of the literary work in question. The author, as well as the publisher, might supply reviews by well-known critics and others that can assist you in making an effective stand.
- Write letters to the editors of newspapers when problems of censorship emerge.
- Organize anti-censorship groups in your communities or at local school sites.
- Work closely with your local NCTE affiliate who might issue position statements on censorship.
- Consult *The Students' Right to Read* for a wealth of information and suggested strategies to assist you with censorship problems.

Jesse Perry
(For the SLATE STEERING COMMITTEE)

Resources

American Civil Liberties Union, 156 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10010.

American Library Association, 50 East Huron Street, Chicago, Illinois 60611.

Kosinski, Jerzy. "Against Book Censorship." *Media and Methods,* January, 1976.

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SLATE

Support for Learning and Teaching of English

BACK TO THE BASICS: LANGUAGE AND DIALECT

The Issues

People complain that the schools aren't teaching students to "talk correctly," and people are confused about what "correct talk" is.

Does "talking correctly" mean making geographical variations conform to local practice? Does it mean getting rid of such symbolic colloquialisms as "he don't" or "ain't got no" in every speech situation? Does it mean distinguishing between "lie" and "lay," or "lend" and "loan," and learning not to say "It was between John and myself"? Or, does "correctness" vary with the audience and the situation?

What people mean by "correctness" will depend on where they grew up, how much education they have had, what ambitions they hold for their children, and/or what social barriers they want to enforce.

Professional Viewpoints: NCTE/Research

In November 1974, the National Council of Teachers of English passed a resolution emphasizing that students have a right to speak and learn in their own language, in the dialect that makes them comfortable and gives them a sense of their own identity and worth. That resolution was passed because NCTE members know something about the nature of language and how people learn it; they have some information not shared by the general public.

As language scholars, we know that language changes, slowly but inevitably, and that what was a solecism a century ago—splitting an infinitive, for instance—is now common practice among our best writers and speakers.

We know that everybody speaks a dialect—there's nothing pejorative about the term. Dialects can be regional or socioeconomic, and include pronunciation, vocabulary, and syntax. All children master the basic elements of their own dialect before they start school.

We know that people learn the language they hear spoken. Young children have an enormous capacity to absorb language, an ability that begins to diminish with adolescence and has diminished so much by adulthood that changing ingrained patterns is a slow and often painful process.

We know that speakers of any dialect can add new words whenever they need them, usually without shifting the major features of their dialects.

We know that children who read a lot, both in and out of school, probably gain more syntactic flexibility and broader vocabularies than children who roam the playgrounds or sit glued to television.

We know that there's no such thing as an absolute standard of correctness. What's right for one situation may be quite "wrong," or unsuitable, in a different situation. Language choices cannot be measured as "right" or "wrong" in the way that yardsticks can be checked to see whether their inches are the proper length.

We know that all speakers adjust their language choices to the situation they find themselves in. Students don't talk on the playground the way they talk in the classroom, or speak to their friends as they speak to their teachers. This ability to shift styles shows a genuine skill in using language—the same skill that adults use in adapting to the requirements of the job, the cocktail bar, or a funeral service.

We know that people, young and old, do make changes in their language habits, but they make those changes only when they get an immediate benefit. High grades or success in school is often not enough to provide the motivation they need.

We know that people *think* in language, and that people can think logically or illogically in any dialect. We know that the ability to think clearly is more important than minor dialect variations, and most of us suspect that time spent on clarity of thought is better spent than time devoted to shifting dialect patterns.

But we also know that people judge others by the language choices they make. Such judgments are harmless enough when they are limited to "Are you from Australia?" or "You sound like a Chicagoan," but they can be damaging when they result in judgments such as "poor white trash," "uneducated (and probably stupid)," or "socially unacceptable." We tell students they will be judged by their language habits, just as they are judged by their dress and their table manners.

Strategies for Action

We can help the public understand what we're trying to do if we:

1) emphasize that practice in using language by sharing experiences, role-playing, and other devices, is a better route to flexibility and effectiveness than having a teacher correct mistakes. In other words, discussions of appropriateness, clarity, and intelligibility are more useful than "chasing errors."
2) explain that drills in usage are more likely to teach nervousness and self-consciousness than change in language. Such drills can teach people to fill in the blanks or name the parts, but seldom teach them to speak or write better.
3) remind parents that schools can supply only a small part of the language learning that goes on. Children spend only seven hours a day in school for five days a week; the rest of their waking hours they are bombarded with language that seems more real to them than the language they hear in the classroom.

4) ask for specific examples from people who are troubled about how language is taught. Deal with each objection separately rather than attempting a general defense of what we do.
5) remind people that the National Assessment results showed that mechanics (usage choices, spelling, syntax, etc.) have not declined but have slightly improved; what declined were sentence flexibility, creativity, and coherence–just the qualities that we're trying to teach.
6) make clear what standardized tests actually measure and what the scores actually mean. Explain what a "norm" is, what a "percentile score" is.
7) show parents some actual assignments and explain what those assignments aim for. Invite them to visit classes and see that most activities are actually more demanding than older methods.
8) urge school boards and legislators to provide classes small enough that every student can have the language practice necessary for real progress.
9) demonstrate that what's "basic" about English is the ability to communicate. Successful communication can take place in many different ways, in many different situations, and depends on the good will of the listener as well as on the skill of the speaker.

Elizabeth McPherson
(For the SLATE STEERING COMMITTEE)

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The SLATE STEERING COMMITTEE offers the Starter Sheets as resources for dealing with current issues affecting the teaching of English. Reproduce these sheets and use them in any ways that might help to promote better understanding of the goals of English teaching.

Vol. 1, No. 7 October 1976

SLATE

Support for Learning and Teaching of English

BACK TO THE BASICS: SPELLING

The Issues

If the public agrees on one "basic" problem, it's probably spelling. Wherever the discussion starts, whether it deals with dialect or usage or writing, fairly soon somebody is bound to say, "But, what about spelling?"

It's hard to be sure about clarity or coherence or creativity, but a misspelled word is easy to spot, and easy to check, if there's a reliable dictionary around. People can argue about commas, and disagree about whether a colon or a dash is more effective, but we are as one in agreeing that we *write* a letter, *right* an injustice, or observe a funeral *rite*. People are saying that many students can't spell very well, or that some students can't spell some words, and that the schools should do something about it.

Professional Viewpoints: NCTE/Research

The modern English alphabet doesn't correspond very accurately to modern English speech; it's a system built on the pronunciation current in London in the seventeenth century, and the language has changed a lot since then. When foreigners say that modern English is hard to learn, they don't mean that speaking it is difficult. They mean that the spelling system seems irrational. Why do we have *write* and *right* and *rite* when we say them all the same, or *enough* and *through* and *though* and *thought* and *cough* when we say them all differently?

But the spelling system can't be changed except very slowly, for some good reasons and for some not so good ones. People who have learned the system, or most of it, are emotionally attached to the old ways. Such simplified spellings as *nite* or *thru* look wrong to them. When George Bernard Shaw left his fortune for improving English spelling, the British courts declared the will invalid. Other movements for spelling reform have failed miserably. There *are* sensible reasons for objecting to a change: libraries would become out of date, or as hard to read as Chaucerian English; and a spelling system beautifully adapted to one dialect of English—Oxford speech, for instance—would be a poor fit with the way English is spoken in Brooklyn or Bombay. For ease in communication among speakers of the many dialects of English, we will probably have to keep the archaic spelling system, and students will have to learn it.

Speakers of any English dialect have to make about the same number of adjustments as they learn to spell. We cannot, for most common words, depend on pronunciation to help us, and the advice to "listen and write what you hear" is almost always misleading. Memorizing spelling lists won't help us to spell words in context, either. And worrying about spelling, in the first draft of anything, slows down the creative process. Even the "good old-fashioned" spelling bees which enabled a few exceptional spellers to demonstrate their special talents, offers no proof of having helped poor spellers to improve.

Strategies for Action

We can point out that some people have always been "poor spellers"; there is no evidence that present day students spell any worse than their forebears. In fact, the National Assessment scores show that mechanics (which includes spelling) has improved slightly, and that what declined was flexibility and coherence.

We can suggest that many students see less need for spelling, as electronic media make reading and writing seem less important, either for business or for pleasure.

We can discuss the difference between being unable to spell *what* or *were*, and being unable to spell *broccoli* or *embarrass*." One represents a real spelling (and probably reading) impairment; the other illustrates the need to use a dictionary. And we can emphasize that knowing when, and how, to use a dictionary effectively is more important for mature students than any amount of spelling drill.

We can remind the public that the business world is full of "editors": secretaries who are in effect specialists hired to polish their bosses' spelling, proofreaders who work over the copy journalists turn in. The antiseptic orthography of the world of commerce is deceptive, and the complaint of many businesspeople that their employees can't spell is sometimes disingenuous.

We can, and should, agree that the ability to spell ordinary words with confidence is a basic skill for which the schools are responsible. But we should also insist that conventional spelling is a matter of careful editing, and that people who write in haste often misspell even very ordinary words. This does not mean that they are poor spellers. More likely, they are competent but careless spellers who count on employe(e)(r)s to correct their misspellings or readers to understand their writing despite the spelling errors.

Elizabeth McPherson
(For the SLATE STEERING COMMITTEE)

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SLATE

Support for Learning and Teaching of English

BACK TO THE BASICS: READING

The Issues

Of all the skills that children learn in school, reading is most often singled out for public attention. If a school's children do not learn to read adequately, the school has failed in an essential task. While teachers, parents, legislators, and government officials can usually agree on this central point, they may differ widely in their assessment of how schools should be going about this task, as well as how successful the enterprise has been.

The current concern that schools must "go back to the basics" in reading instruction reflects both the value that everyone places on the teaching of reading, and the confusion about what 'the basics' might be. Public concern has been raised by a number of events which seem to indicate the schools have failed: press reports of falling verbal scores on the SAT and ACT, professors' complaints about the reading ability of college students, early NAEP results indicating an inadequate command of reading skills for 9, 13, and 17 year olds, the Right to Read campaign's emphasis on adult illiteracy and on the relatively high level of competence needed for functional literacy in our complex industrial society. One result has been a renewed concern that reading skills are not being adequately taught, that schools are failing in their responsibility, that we need to ask once again why Johnny can't read.

Professional Viewpoints: NCTE/Research

As teachers of English and language arts, we share with the general public the concern that reading should be well-taught and we consistently seek ways to improve our teaching. But we know that there is no single or simple route to that goal. Still, our accumulated store of research, theory, and practical experience has taught us a number of important things about the teaching of reading.

We know that reading is a language process and is affected by all of the things which affect a child's language development. Variations in home background, physical health, and mental well-being all lead to variations in ability to use language and in turn to variations in reading achievement. The school is not faced with a 'blank slate' when it begins to teach a child to read. It is extending and building upon well-established oral language skills that lead the child to expect, among other things, that what is read will make sense. Even for the beginning reader, the task is much more complex than simply the proper 'calling' of words or letter sounds: the words and sentences must make sense in terms of the child's background of expectations about language (its sounds, its grammar, its meaningfulness) and about life (what has happened, what cannot happen, what just might be possible). In another way, however, such requirements for 'meaningfulness' provide important clues to guide the reading process, helping the reader to recognize when something has gone wrong as well as to make a reasonable guess at unknown words or expressions.

If readers are to make *reasonable* guesses, they need to be familiar with a wide variety of reading materials. Indeed one danger in the "back to the basics" call, as the NCTE Commission on Reading has noted in its discussions, is that it can encourage the separation of the teaching of reading from the teaching of content. The result can be the teaching of reading as an isolated process rather than as a means for the communication of information, ideas, and experiences. *It is easy to forget when we become concerned with 'the basics' that our best learning occurs when we are performing real and significant tasks.*

There is no one sure way to success in teaching reading. Though the most important ingredient is an enthusiastic, dedicated teacher sensitive to the needs of pupils and trained in a variety of methods for meeting those needs, some children learn to read even before coming to school and a few never succeed even with the best and most dedicated teachers. Drill in phonics, often stressed by those urging a return to the basics, offers no surer path to success than any other single approach, though there is a place for some of it. The danger arises when drill becomes virtually the whole of the reading program, for we know from research that meaningless drills and meaningless content (in any area of learning) are harder to master, less likely to be remembered, and more difficult to apply. As one result of an overemphasis on 'reading subskills', poor readers often come to expect that nothing they try to read will make sense to them. In such cases we have denied the pupils access to the purpose of reading, and we should not be surprised if they reject the process (and what is for them nothing but discouragement and failure).

Literacy is itself a complex concept. In our industrial society, 'functional literacy' involves the ability to read messages as diverse as want ads and insurance forms, James Bond novels and tax assessments. How well one 'should' be able to read varies from culture to culture and generation to generation; in the U.S. demands on reading skills have been rising constantly over the past decades.

Measures of reading achievement are another frequent cause of confusion. The typical report on a child or a school is given as a 'grade-equivalent' score. The statistical basis of such scores is straightforward enough, but those reported to be 'below grade level' are left with a false sense of failure and low achievement. The eternal struggle to bring everyone 'up to grade level', laudable though it sounds, is doomed from the start because it is inherent in a norm-referenced, standardized

reading test that 50 percent of the children taking it will be below grade level. Schools so fortunate that all of their pupils are at or above grade level simply mean that elsewhere, where the health and social welfare of the children may not be so favorable, there will be schools almost all of whose children will 'fail'. While we believe that teachers and schools have important and lasting effects upon children's reading abilities, we also know that socioeconomic factors have a strong influence. As Robert Thorndike put it in summarizing the results of a study of *Reading Comprehension Education in Fifteen Countries* (IEA, 1973), "When the population of a school comes from homes in which the parents are themselves well educated, economically advantaged, and able to provide an environment in which reading materials and communications media are available, the school shows a generally superior level of reading achievement."

Finally, we know that there is still a great deal that we do not know about reading achievement. The most recent results from the NAEP second round of reading assessments suggest an improvement in students' performance in reading, but NAEP officials can only speculate about the reasons for the improvement. After a thorough review of previous research, Farr, Tuinman, and Rowls concluded in a report prepared for the Educational Testing Service that there had been a gradual improvement in reading competency over the four decades prior to 1965, though since 1965 this improvement may have lessened or halted. But the evidence is so complex and so many factors are involved that the authors conclude, "We are now convinced that anyone who says *he knows* that literacy is decreasing is a very unsure person. Such a person is at best unscholarly and at worst dishonest." (R. Farr, J. Tuinman, and M. Rowls. *Reading Achievement in the U.S.: Then and Now*. ERIC Document No. ED 109 595.)

Strategies for Action

You may wish to distribute this and other SLATE Starter Sheets to fellow teachers, community and parent groups, school board members, administrators, and textbook and curriculum planning committees. In addition, you may want to:

- Contact your local NCTE affiliate for names of local as well as national experts who can give advice about issues related to reading instruction.
- Respond to press reports, letters, or editorials about 'Why Johnny Can't Read' with a request to see the evidence on which claims are made. Work closely with your local affiliate to respond specifically to the evidence offered, if any is forthcoming.
- Take the initiative in explaining your approaches to reading instruction. If colleagues, supervisors, and parents groups understand what you are doing and why, they will be less susceptible to an emotional call for "back to basics."
- Use the local press, through letters to the editor and through contracts with the staff education writer, to help keep the public informed about the teaching of reading. Most newspapers are eager for sensible comments on educational issues.
- If the results of standardized reading tests are released by your school or district, be sure that they are accompanied by clearly written, adequate interpretations. For guidelines, see Venezky (1974) and *Common Sense and Testing in English*.

Arthur N. Applebee
(For the SLATE Steering Committee)

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Seven SLATE Starter Sheets have been issued as part of volume I of the SLATE Newsletter.

What Are the "Basics" in English? (1:2)
Back to the Basics: Grammar and Usage (1:3)
Back to the Basics: Composition (1:4)
Censorship of Instructional Materials (1:5)
Back to the Basics: Language and Dialect (1:6)
Back to the Basics: Spelling (1:7)
Back to the Basics: Reading (1:8)

People who donate $10.00 or more to SLATE receive a free copy of each of the above Starter Sheets, and are added to the mailing list for future issues of the Newsletter. Single copies are also available for $1.00 for the set of 7, from SLATE at NCTE, 1111 Kenyon Rd., Urbana, Ill. 61801.

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